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2016-10-24

Thesis proposes infusing adaptability into standard operating procedures

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Strict adherence to bureaucratic standard operating procedures during an emergency can yield fatal errors, and Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security student Shawn Harwood wants to change that.

A special agent with Homeland Security Investigations, Harwood is completing his master's degree thesis, "Building Adaptable Standard Operating Procedures for Complex Crises," which seeks to integrate adaptability and critical thinking into standard operating procedures.

"If emergency responders strictly follow an SOP in a crisis environment, they may suffer from a cognitive bias that hinders their ability to react to the unexpected; tunnel vision can be a by-product of SOP guidance," Harwood said. "This thesis addresses the core problem of how emergency responders apply prediction-dependent SOPs to prediction-defiant complex crises."

Harwood's thesis presents case studies of the 9/11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and the Fukushima-Dai'ichi nuclear incident to explore the misapplication of static, ineffective SOPs in poorly predicted disasters. His analysis also demonstrates that an adaptive, innovative approach often led to successful results during these events, raising the question, "Could a more adaptive institutional approach to crisis response diminish the impact of complex disasters?"

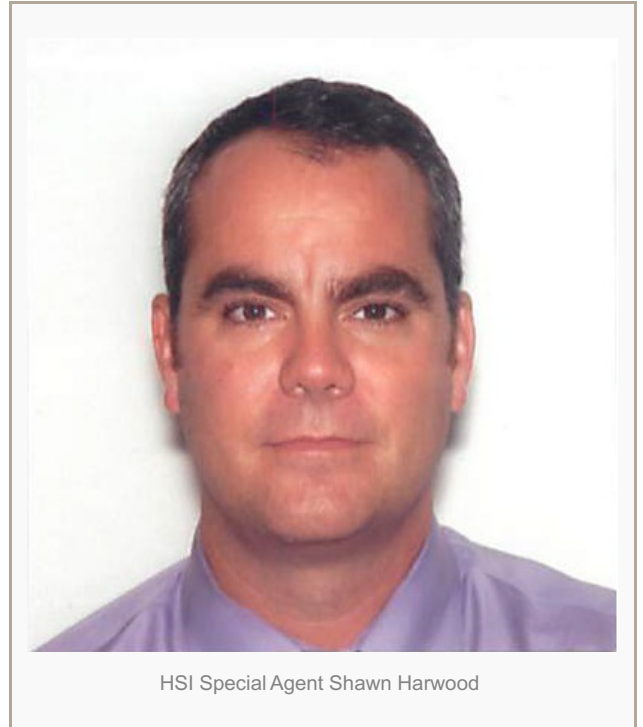
"These mega-crises were extreme, catastrophic examples, but the concept plays out in local emergencies as well," Harwood said.

For example, he said the conventional active shooter protocol is the perfect case of an excessively prescriptive crisis SOP, even describing how a responding officer should park his vehicle before entering a building.

"Tactical SOPs can be incredibly granular in their guidance," Harwood said. "It's easy to imagine a circumstance where officers impaired by SOP-driven tunnel vision might fail to detect and adapt to the unpredicted within their operational setting."

Perhaps surprisingly, Harwood's vision doesn't call for the elimination of SOPs in crisis response; he recognizes that they are an indelible part of the emergency management field. Rather, he recommends modifications to the SOP model—adaptability prompts—that account for today's unpredictable crisis environment and stimulate adaptive behavior during field operations. He has also designed a prototype operational advisor, called a "crisis co-pilot," to advise the lead emergency responder during a crisis event, helping the operator to approach the emergency with an adaptive, innovative perspective.

"Standard operating procedures are a key component in our emergency response paradigm," Harwood said. "They are used to train new emergency responders from day one at the academy, as well as guide veteran operators' actions during an emergency. Unfortunately, the traditional SOP is a flawed instrument when applied to



HSI Special Agent Shawn Harwood

unpredictable emergencies. The homeland security enterprise needs to modify SOPs in a way that promotes adaptive, innovative behavior to manage today's unpredictable, complex crises.”

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